1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929)1937
OI 17 Murngin OI 17



561 562 which center in the men's ground and overflow during parts of the rituals into the general camp where her world is centered.

The principle of sex, then, has been used to organize a status group, with the women and small children of either sex in one group and the initiated men in another. The women's group remains ritually undifferentiated in a status sense except for a tendency to give women near 562 888 or in the menopause preference over younger women in those ceremonies in which women participate. For example, in the Gunabibi the old women beat the ground to stop Muit, and in the Djungguan it is felt to be more appropriate and effective for older women to dance around the warngaitja than for men to do so. This corresponds with the lifting of part of the feeling of taboo around the mother-in-law after she loses many of her secondary sexual characteristics and "gets to be an old woman and looks all the same as a man."

561 761 Murngin age grading is largely a religious phenomenon consisting of a series of rites of passage from one age group to another in the life cycle of the individual. It seems, therefore, nearer the truth of Murngin thought to treat the life of the individual as the complete entity it appears to be in the thought of the culture. Each Murngin's beginning is in the sacred totemic well of his ancestors, and each Murngin's end is within the same subterranean depths. His first status is that of the unborn child in the form of a small fish which exists with others of his kind beside the totemic spirits of the clan, the totemic mythological ancestors, the ancient clan dead, and those who have recently died. He [626] is under the control of his ancestors and the totem, and his passage from the world of the unborn to that of the living depends on the good behavior of his parents, particularly of his father. The Murngin think of this from the parents' point of view and conduct their lives more carefully because of the fear of childlessness.

561 761 787 851 The Murngin baby comes from the totem well through a religious experience of the father, since it is the father who is in touch with the totem world of which the mother is supposed to have no knowledge. The father's mystical dream experience is itself a kind of rite of passage of the unborn and begins the child's socialization. The father's announcement to the mother of the child's arrival (frequently, it must be admitted, after she has reported her pregnancy to the father, who has kept silent, he says, to test the validity of his experience) changes the father's age-grade status. It removes certain ritualistic food taboos and definitely establishes his place in the older men's group. This means, then, that the father-child reciprocal functions as a unit: the

9: Thomson E-5 (1935-1943)1949
OI17 Murngin OI17

tensity of their relationship, gauged by the degree of totemic inheritance. But these groups are certainly not tribes.[9]

The clan, or in practice its occupational group, the horde (*vide infra* p. 12), is the most important unit of social life in Arnhem Land. The clan is the territorial or land-owning group, but the horde is the war-making group, and each horde is to a large extent independent and self-governing. Anything approaching kingship or chieftainship is unknown in Arnhem Land. Law, order and discipline is laid down by tradition. It is defined in the mythology, and in the sagas of the culture heroes, and is maintained by public opinion, enforced by the old men, who act as custodians of the heritage of the clan. The authority of the old men is backed, in turn, by the *wiṯŋärr*, the totemic ancestors themselves, whose edicts are enforced by the threat of supernatural sanctions.

There is no individual ownership of land. Land ownership is vested in the clan as the hereditary group, and as this is a *patrilineal*[10] society, a man is born into his father's clan and has hunting rights over the territory of his own clan and generally over that of several others, particularly that

[9] The arbitrary use of the term *Murngin*, "tribe", for the people of Eastern Arnhem Land, which was introduced by Professor W. Lloyd Warner (*A Black Civilisation*; New York and London, 1937) is particularly unfortunate, for as was pointed out (footnote 5) east of Cape Stewart in North Central Arnhem Land tribal organisation is conspicuous by its absence from the intricate social organisation of the area, although it appears again at Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and occurs along the Roper River. The word *murngin* has nothing to do with social organisation, and is in no sense the name of a "tribe".

[10] Descent, among the aborigines, in family, clan and certain other hereditary groups, is reckoned either in the male line, i.e. through the father, in which case it is called *patrilineal*, or through the mother, when it is called *matrilineal*.

10: Warner E-5 (1926-1929) 1958
OI17 Murngin OI17



around her I can't talk high; I must talk low. It is just the same for her. I can't look at her when we are close. If I go along a path and meet my mokul I must leave that path. I must leave that path and go another way. If I walked along a path and did not see her and accidentally touched her, her sweat would make me swell up in the groin. My sweat would do the same thing for her. 159 606

My mother-in-law is a very good woman. I like her very much. She is very good to me. She always saves all the tobacco she gets and keeps it for me when I have no more. I always send her the best of the kangaroos I kill and the turtles I spear. She always says nice things about me to other people. I hear them and it makes me feel good. When my mokul gets a little bit old and she can't have any more children and she looks a little like a man and has hair on her face, then I can talk to her and she can talk to me. We must be very serious when we do this (pages 101-103). [888]

I like my mother's mother [mari] very much. I like her best of all. She is more my mother than my own mother. When I was little, she looked out for me more than my own mother. She gave me plenty of food. She carried me when I was a baby. I like my mother's sister next best, then my mother. My mother's sister was very good to me, too (pages 96-98). 159 603 [604]

My true father died when I was small. My mother and we children went to my father's yukiyuko [younger brother], as is the law of our people. 159 768

Having an old woman for a wife is no good. She can't have a baby. She is too old. If a man doesn't have children he won't have any sons and daughters-in-law, and he, when he is old, won't have any food and plenty of spears and plenty of tobacco. It is no good having an old woman. She is all the same as rubbish. 159 581

My wife is not like that—she is young. She is a very good woman. She always looks straight ahead and keeps her mouth very still when she is around other men. She never talks loud. Sometimes, when I am away too long, she won't give me food when I come back. She thinks I have been away too long. When she does this I sit down and wait a while and say nothing. It is better to keep quiet. Then I say, "Well, what are you mad about?" She says nothing, and her face looks different. I can see by how her heart is beating that she is wild inside. I keep asking and asking. Then she tells me she thinks maybe I have stayed away a long time and have been with some other woman. She thinks maybe I haven't been hunting and I have been fooling her. Clear inside she knows this is not true, and by and by she gets quiet and gives me something to eat. Sometimes she thinks when I have been away that I have an old sweetheart and that I go out all the time to see her. After she has growled for a long time I say nothing and then I say, "No, I have no sweetheart. If I did have I would come and tell 159 593

magical rites and spells, it does not involve the co-operation of spirit familiars.

The majority of informants stated that the cult of the *marrngit* is not a hereditary one, and they asserted that although the son of a *marrngitmirri* father may also be *marrngitmirri*, membership of the cult does not necessarily pass from father to son. But at least one informant of Wanguri clan, a clan of Mindjikai *barpuro*, declared that in his own clan, of which the principal territory is at Arnhem Bay, a little to the south and east of Elcho Island, the cult of the *marrngit* was hereditary and did pass from father to son. On controversial issues of this kind, long discussions often took place among the old men who acted as informants, and finally they would reach agreement and give me their verdict. Far from being careless or merely anxious to please, they took great pains to check information by referring to people who possessed specialized knowledge, and took much trouble in settling any doubtful point. My informants declared that the *marrngit* was also hereditary in the Burara tribe, where, however, the cult of the *ragalk* was also established and was certainly dominant. Some conflict, or difference of opinion, does occur in matters of this kind particularly in north-eastern Arnhem Land where there is no hard and fast, or orthodox, view, supported by a large body of opinion.

This means that, as might be expected, in the absence of a written language or an organized body to formalize belief, there is necessarily some degree of flexibility, some scope for individual ideas, and within the atypical, intensely segmentary, social organization of eastern Arnhem Land, this variability tends to be emphasized. Even in matters of kinship, which concerns the entire group, since it regulates all behaviour, differences sometimes occurred and the people would call in old men and submit an intricate or knotty problem to them in the way that I have mentioned above.

It was intended originally to confine this paper to a short account of the *marrngitmirri*, translated from the statements of the medicinemen themselves, and to follow this with descriptions of the *marrngit*, which are shown in the accompanying plates of actual drawings of their spirit familiars made by these medicinemen. But my attention has been drawn to an article by the late Revd. T. T. Webb published some years ago, 'The Making of a Marrngit,'[2] which contains some errors and misconceptions, and I have therefore extended the scope of this article to discuss the relationship of the medicineman and sorcerer in Arnhem Land and the roles and the distribution of these cults.

In the opening paragraph of this article Mr. Webb says: 'In east Arnhem Land there are two classes of magicians

[p.97(c)]

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
O117 Murngin O117



your head, and his nose has a ridge like yours. I never noticed before just how much he resembles you, especially when he walks and swings his elbows. He's a splendid lad.'

Naratjin was amusing his small son beside his windbreak in the cool of the day, when Maulin, a man from another horde and moiety, spoke thus to him from the door of his hut. Nomads are extraordinarily susceptible to praise and readily respond to what we would call flattery. But Naratjin was delighted at what he had heard and set about preparing the customary present of food for the flatterer. He painted his son with coloured clay and decorated him with armlets and corslet of string and bird feathers, and took him to visit Maulin. Looking up and seeing the child in all his glory, the flatterer expressed his pleasure before graciously accepting the present. At first I suspected the flatterer of 'singing for his supper', but this somewhat rare form of praise is genuine; it is spontaneously given in public, and Yulengor who may be sitting near by courteously lower their voices whilst the 'toast' is proposed.

A carefully preserved etiquette governs the distribution of food. Choice parts of the kill, such as back legs and loins, go to the old men, before the rest is divided according to the age and importance of those present. Generally the meal proceeds peacefully, and each hunter receives his share with a studied indifference which is under careful control, for the greatest importance is attached to good food.

Quarrels can arise from the unfair distribution of food, as when Jaua brought in a kangaroo to share with his brothers and an old man of the Ngaimil horde, and the Ngaimil elder quickly muttered an incantation over it, declaring that he had thereby made it sacred to his Ngaimil totem. By his act, the old man made it possible for him to eat the meat but impossible for the youth who had killed the animal to

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
O117 Murngin O117

## FROM HAND TO MOUTH

Old men sometimes demand a further treatment of the food, and the partly cooked damper is then kneaded into a wide, thin layer and rolled into bark before being re-baked. By this final process the 'ngutu' becomes impregnated by tabu, and only fully initiated males may eat it. I have seen men delirious in the cycad season; though not showing other ill effects, they do not recover for several weeks. Kuninyal suffered in this way, and I remember he was the sport of the camp and became thin and haggard through not being able to hunt for himself. It was openly stated that he had been eating half-cooked cycad cakes.

Many nuts, berries, and fruits are found in the bush, but they are not very enticing. Some are as large as cherries, but the majority are the size of currants. Wild cashew nuts, ripening at the end of the dry season, are the most favoured of all. Small bright red and orange cashew fruit are attached to kidney-shaped brown nuts which are full of prussic acid. A thick skin on the nut also contains acid, and it is roasted to extract the kernel, which tastes like a tiny potato with a peanut flavour. In the roasting process, acid spurts from the fire, and fumes in the smoke severely burn anyone near by. Children develop scaly blisters, and women tending the cooking fires receive extensive burns.

'Larrani' trees, with their grey branches and large green waxy leaves, make a gay sight when they are loaded with bunches of ripe red fruit. The fruit looks like red apples, but they have large woody kernels and very little flesh. Large quantities are gathered, and hunters use them to slake their thirst; but I must confess to finding that their astringency only increased my desire for water.

Another popular fruit comes from the beautiful East Indian tamarind tree, which thrives and bears prolifically around old Macassar watering-places. The seed pods are filled with a pleasant acidulous brown pulp which can be stored, but nomads strip the trees and eat the fruit long before it is ripe.

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OII7 Murngin OII7

CHAPTER EIGHT

# *Family Life in the Jungle*

A FAMILY is the most important unit in aboriginal society, and the horde is founded on it. Some families have as few as three members; the largest I saw was that in which Wonggu had twenty-six wives and fifty children. A horde consists of a father's family and his sons' families, and if a few generations of sons escape their enemies' spears the horde is a large one. Upon this simple horde-family relationship depends the entire intricate, bewildering, and far-reaching aboriginal social organization.

Polygamy is an ancient custom and has an economic basis, for women are the chief food-gatherers and are coveted as assets and never regarded as expensive luxuries. A man cannot foresee the number of wives he is to have, but he hopes for several, and as his influence increases there is a tendency to bestow women on him. Bestowal of women is so arranged that old men obtain young wives and young men generally receive old widows, and incongruous as the arrangement may seem to us it ensures that old men have active women to hunt for them and their elderly wives, and that the young men, well able to look after themselves, make do with elderly widows. Prestige lies with the old men, and they enforce the practice despite constant objections from both the young men and the young women. As youths grow older their authority increases and they in turn bargain for young women.

Women live a much harder life than men, and are neglected and unwanted as they grow old before their time;

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OII7 Murngin OII7



888 [562] perhaps partially blind, with rheumatism stiffening their joints, and with their small and once shapely hands calloused and twisted through digging. In a mustering camp, I overheard casual remarks which led me to suspect that two old women had been left by younger wives to perish in the bush. None of the Yulengor attached any importance to the story, and I found it hard to obtain reliable information. They were just not interested, and by the time I arrived on the scene, the aged women had been dead for a day or more. One had been blind and had been left at this camp in the sand-hills without water or shelter, although both were to be had a few chains distant. Countless dingo tracks led to and from the horror we buried under a pile of stones.

595 462 Stone Age man is usually benevolently disposed toward his wives, but when he has a number of them he tends to leave the work to them, and only as he feels inclined does he exercise a man's prerogative and hunt for kangaroos, wallabies, and emus, or spear fish and turtle. He is expected to control his women. He adds little to the small-talk, and when he does make a remark it is generally of the kind that implies: 'When I ope' my lips, let no dog bark.' Old Baratjuna reclined in camp whilst his wives prepared for the hunt. Some were going to a distant swamp, others were to forage near by. One wife wanted to go to the swamp, but her husband told her to stay in the camp and mind the young children. She complained for a time, and seeing that she provoked no response she made a move to go to the swamp. But before she had taken a dozen paces her husband threw his stone axe at her and broke a rib; that, as far as he was concerned, ended the incident.

595 562 [582] From childhood, women take an inferior place; they are often studiously ignored; they are treated as chattels, yet genuine family affection does exist. The constitution of a family is sometimes conducive to good feeling, for a man's

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OII7 Murngin OII7



821 the clouds together and pushing the wind before them in the
825 way that water spreads out before a rolling stone. As he
789 labours the snake weeps copiously and his tears fall as rain. If a snake is not available for rain-making, a bundle of grass may be tied together and submerged in a waterhole. Instructions are sung to this before its immersion, whereupon
[776] the great Spirit who made the world and at times revealed himself through the mythical serpent, assumes the functions of the missing earthly reptile and sends the rain.

In west Arnhem Land another mythological serpent
[184] sends rain in response to aboriginal wizardry. He shows himself as the rainbow, and thunder is the rumbling of his body as he turns over to urinate in the form of rain. To impress his admirers with his strength, Umbij hits two stones together till they flash fiery lightning.

821 If an old man is offended at some slight in the wet season
789 he will threaten to send a storm. All day Munju had been
888 mumbling and scowling at the door of his shelter, but his temper improved considerably toward sundown as nimbus clouds gathered to the accompaniment of distant thunder. That night a fierce tropical storm swept over the island, trees were struck by lightning, thunder crashed, and the wind howled as it levelled trees and shelters. In the sparkling stillness of the following dawn, the sun rose over a subdued camp, where Munju's honour had been vindicated, and he accepted the homage of his contemporaries. Also in the
[302] stormy wet season I heard a noisy termagant at Yirrkala
[578] objecting to young women cutting their hair, and when they persisted she threatened to call up a storm. That night we had heavy rain and a strong wind, and next day old Bamaja's exploit was referred to in subdued tones. Like most rain-makers she was aged, and having lived in the open air for sixty years with no other shelter than a sheet of bark, she knew her weather and could make a fairly accurate forecast.